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Mind and spirit: hypnagogia and religious experience

“I was carried in the spirit into a very dark valley. I saw a cottage standing alone and it appeared to be inhabited by the light that I saw through the door and windows shutters. I was surprised to see that there was no other light...I saw just at this crisis an army or legion of what I supposed to be soldiers...one riding in the midst of them upon a black horse his eyes were like balls of black glass, he was very large in stature, he gave orders to destroy this cottage...and ordered them to let out a quantity of water that had been preserved for the purpose of destroying the foundation of the cottage...But now at this instant a light sprang up and I saw the cottage carried by the water and set down safely on a gentle eminence.”

Those words were written in the days leading up to 29 January 1841 by a Mormon woman named Eliza Bromley. She was seeking an “interpretation” of her experience by a leader in her religious community and began her letter with an important preamble: “I told you that I would send you a dream, but I will send you a vision that I have had since I saw you.” Bromley went on to set the scene, stating that the “vision” came after “retiring to rest one night”. Only five months earlier, however, Bromley had written to a different Mormon leader to report a “dream” in which she saw the prophetic future conversion of a specific man from the local area.

Almost ninety years later another Mormon, William Pelley, awoke in the pre-dawn hours from his own “inner shriek”. The sound and accompanying sensation were unfamiliar but physical. What is more, Pelley recalled that he “was fully awake, and yet [he] was not”: “I was awake, mind you, and whereas I had been on a bed...when the phenomenon started, the next moment I was plunging down a mystic depth of cool, blue space...” But how could Pelley be both fully awake and not? How did Bromley distinguish between “visions” and “dreams”? Both occurred in bed at night, and both had potential religious or spiritual value. The answer may have to do with the traditional dualistic categories invoked in the accounts – dreams or visions, awake or asleep – as well as with a more recent alternative that Bromley and Pelley likely never considered.

In the course of western thought, dualities have been highly influential, pitting mind and soul against brain and body, the act of sensing against the act of perceiving, sanity against insanity, hallucinations and delusions against truth and reality. Indeed, even today, common theories of psychosis discuss causes and consequences in terms of “reality monitoring” – some have it; some don’t. These notions reach back quite far – not least, to Aristotelian theories of perception – and owe a great deal to European philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes. The latter’s famous assertion, *cogito ergo sum*, crystallized the dualism of the individual and led future philosophers to locate personal identity in the continuous mind rather than the fleeting body. For figures like Joseph Butler and John Locke, for example, identity was interior.

But what of this interior-exterior divide? Could the mind deceive the senses, or vice versa? Answers were pursued through discussions of perception and yet another dualism: waking versus sleeping. As Stuart Clark describes in *Vanities of the Eye*, Montaigne, Hobbes, and Descartes addressed the complexities of perception and vision by pointing to examples from art

and dreams. In his essay on “Optics”, for example, Descartes recognises that artistic depictions of circles are often best formed by ovals, a situation in which the mind perceives an object via an image that does not perfectly resemble the object. Herein lies what Clark calls the “paradox of vision” and, more importantly, herein lies room for deception. Indeed, in his ‘Meditations on First Philosophy’, Descartes refers to *melancholia* – in the medieval sense of an affective psychological state which leads to delusion – as a clear example of “madness” precisely because it presents cases in which the correspondence between the outer sensory world and inner thought is ruptured. Thus, while mental images do not necessarily resemble objects seen with the eyes, a complete break between body and mind is indicative of insanity.

Dreams, however, represented a special case. They are produced by a largely disconnected (sleeping) mind but, as such, have long seemed mysterious and spiritual. Centuries before Sigmund Freud popularised a link between dreams and insanity, quoting Immanuel Kant’s assertion that the “madman” is a “dreamer in waking”, the dreaming state was caught up in overtly religious discourse. Although St Augustine and others had sanctioned dreams as valid conduits of spiritual revelation, the iconoclasm of the sixteenth century meant that “visions” of all sorts received reassessment. As the aforementioned philosophical queries overlapped with increasingly spiritualised theories of dreams, a sort of typology emerged. The content and origin of dreams was taken to be meaningful (spiritual, whether good or evil) or mundane (natural). As Clark points out, the so-called truth of a dream came to be measured by the outcomes of the dream rather than the fidelity of the mental content to some external objectivity. If the dream was a supernatural vision, it was true only inasmuch as it led to religious probity.

Yet, the basic connection of dreaming to religious phenomena is at least as old as Lucretius who, in his first-century BCE work *De Rerum Natura*, prefigures the *animism* of nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor by connecting the idea of immortality to the agents seen in dreams: “Back then, in those early days, men would see, when awake but even more when asleep, those of especial strength or great stature or beauty. To these apparitions they gave credence and they attributed sensation...and believed they embodied various kinds of perfection, along with which – why not? – immortality too.” Even today, scholars continue to offer theories concerning the relationship between dreaming and religious thinking. For example, Kelly Bulkeley’s 2016 *Big Dreams* outlines a theory in which particularly vivid dreams engender or inspire religious beliefs and experiences, driving individuals toward imagination and innovation.

In all of this, dualism persists. The individual is awake or asleep, the sleeping dream is natural or supernatural. As psychiatric medicine gained traction in the nineteenth century, another possibility was introduced. In addition to meaningful and mundane, dream-visions could also be mad. As we have seen, Descartes and Kant perpetuated a notion of ‘madness’ premised on an impermeable boundary separating reality from fiction, dreaming from waking. While religious voices from at least as early as the medieval period claimed legitimacy for visions during sleep, the scenario of a vision while awake came to be understood first in terms of “apparitions” – with early modern philosophers using the concept to illustrate the deceitfulness of perception – and then, in the second half of the nineteenth century, in terms of “hallucinations”. Indeed, all along,

the philosophy of mind was also a philosophy of consciousness and mental health, largely erected around a rigid scaffolding separating the clear reason of wakefulness from the opaque deceptions of sleep.

Punctuating that history, however, were the intellectuals who recognised the possible inaccuracy of dichotomising consciousness. One could mention, for example, the Catholic lawyer Pierre Le Loyer or the visionary theologian Emanuel Swedenborg both of whom - at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively - identified the moment between waking and sleeping as a privileged state for experiencing divine revelation. Furthermore, by the mid-nineteenth century, French psychiatrists such as Alfred Maury and Alexandre de Boismont not only highlighted the unique fecundity of this liminal state but also labelled the attendant phenomena, "hallucinations". In fact, Maury coined "hypnagogic hallucinations" as early as 1848 as a way of clustering the visual, auditory, haptic, and emotional phenomena accompanying the transition between waking and sleeping. In the century or so since, much relevant research has been produced which both problematises easy dichotomies of consciousness and further illuminates the particular features of hypnagogia. Typically referring to both the states between waking and sleeping (hypnagogic) as well as between sleeping and waking (hypnopompic), hypnagogia is now a well-documented set of phenomena. Individuals report hearing their name called just as they are falling asleep, feeling a presence in the room with them, seeing blurry images, noticing diffuse light, and having out-of-body experiences (OBEs). What is more, twenty-first-century studies suggest that these hypnagogic hallucinations occur with considerable frequency - estimates range from approximately 39% to 85% of the general population.

Thus, conservatively, over a third of the population reports having one of these experiences. This accords well with recent historical research on religious experiences funded by a partnership between the EU and Durham University as well as by the Wellcome Trust as part of Durham's *Hearing the Voice* project. After analysing 65 first-hand accounts of religious experiences among nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Mormons, it appears that approximately twenty-one (32%) fit the current phenomenology of hypnagogia. That is, about one third of the cases examined include details indicative of the experiences now known to occur in such liminal states. Journal entries and personal correspondences tell of "dreams", "views", and "visions" occurring at night as the subject retires to bed and, in many cases, include an image of someone in the room just prior to an OBE. In addition to Eliza Bromley and William Pelley's mentioned above, consider John Powell's 1867 experience: "I was lying on the bed in the Cedar Springs School House when a personage came to me and said, 'Come!' My spirit then left my body and went with my guide...Then I found myself the same as I was before he came to me." The melding of initial hallucinoid experiences with subsequent OBEs and spiritual journeys not only mimics earlier accounts - such as Swedenborg's own - but also finds support in recent Hypnagogia literature. In 2016, Flavie Waters and colleagues noted that there is often a phenomenological progression beginning with the visual, to which auditory and somatic experiences are added. In this way, hypnagogic hallucinations seep into sleeping dreams.

However, some cases do not include the somatic OBEs, but instead share characteristics such as bright light accompanying the presence in the room. Norris Stearns, a teen in 1815, reported that, as he lay in bed one night, “there appeared a small gleam of light in the room, above the brightness of the sun.” When Stearns “turned to the other side of the bed”, he saw “two spirits”. Something quite similar is recounted by Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, in 1838 as he wrote of an experience from the 1820s: “After I had retired to my bed...I discovered a light appearing in the room which continued to increase until the room was lighter than at noonday and immediately a personage appeared at my bedside.”

In these accounts, terms like “dream” and “vision” are sometimes used interchangeably, undoubtedly linked to cultural inheritances such as biblical narratives, the limitations of English, and even the socially-sustained expressions of what historian Richard Bushman calls “vernacular visionaries”. However, as illustrated by Bromley’s experiences, some descriptions seem to exhibit considerable anxiety concerning the proper phenomenological categories, possibly betraying their conformity to the dualistic philosophies of mind discussed above. The meaningful, mundane, and mad options persist, but these historical cases seem to view the second and third as a choice between sleeping dreams and waking hallucinations. It is no surprise, then, that they invoke the supernatural (the “meaningful”) as the only option capable of explaining their unusual experiences, even if they do so relatively inconsistently. Joseph Smith recalled subsequently questioning whether the experience cited above was “real” or perhaps merely a “dream of vision”, finally deciding it was real. Yet, one of his associates recounted Smith’s experience to a third party with serious concern for its categorisation, insisting the event was a “vision”: “And though it was in the night, yet it was not a dream. There is no room for conjecture in this matter, and to talk of deception would be to sport with the common sense of every man who knows when he is awake, when he sees and when he does not see...He was awake...he heard the angel’s words with his ears, and received a joy and happiness indescribable.”

However, the so-called “common sense” that distinguishes waking visions from sleeping dreams may be flawed, and not just in an abstract philosophical sense. Indeed, Le Loyer and Swedenborg may have been correct; perhaps the transition between waking and sleeping *is* a privileged state, a “spiritual” state. Seeing a divine agent at the bedside and/or one’s own body from a distance, awestruck at the bright light permeating the room, one is likely to be inspired, if not by the vividness of the event then at least by the uneasiness felt when casting it as either dream or vision (or delusion). Perhaps, reframing the experiences as hypnagogic rather than supernatural offers fresh clarity. Doing so not only links the frequency of some forms of religious experiences to the prevalence rates of known sleep disturbances and their associated phenomena but also examines the confounding historical descriptions of those experiences through the lens of a non-dualistic theory of consciousness. After all, Pelley was “fully awake and yet [he] was not.” Ultimately, his case and many others seem to disclose something about how philosophy (even, philology) circumscribes our experiences while affording corresponding insight into how we classify deception, mental illness, and the human struggle to make meaning from unusual events.

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